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ABSTRACT

The Freirean approach to adult literacy education bases the content of language lessons on learners' cultures and personal experiences. This approach has been used in the developing world in successful native and second language literacy projects sponsored by governments and voluntary organizations in both urban and rural settings. The two most distinct features of the Freirean approach are dialogue and problem-posing. Dialogue is used as a means in which two parties confront each other as knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two-way communication. In Problem-posing, cultural themes in the form of open-ended problems are incorporated into materials (e.g., pictures, songs, short stories) that are used to gnerate discussion. This questioning process leads students to define the real-life problem being represented, discuss it's causes, and propose actions to solve it. The Freirean approach can be used in native language literacy education and adapted for use in English-as-a-Second-Language literacy education. (VWL)

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The Freirean Approach to Adult Literacy Education

Prepared by David Spener, National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education *April 1990*

What Is the Freirean Approach?

The Freirean approach to adult literacy education bases the content of language lessons on learners' cultures and personal experiences. Named for Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the approach has also been referred to as the problem-posing approach (Wallerstein, 1983; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987), the psycho-social approach (Hope, Timmel, & Hodzi, 1984; Fargo, 1981), the learner-centered approach (Aflorve, 1989), the liberatory approach (Shor & Freire, 1987; Facundo, 1984), and the participatory approach (Jurmo, 1987). It has been used in the developing world in successful native and second language literacy projects sponsored by governments and international voluntary organizations in both rural and urban settings. In the United States, many community-based organizations have used the approach in their nonformal educational programs for developing basic literacy in English, in native languages other than English, and in English as a second language (ESL). Because the Freirean approach goes by a number of different names and Freire's ideas have had such an impact on adult education internationally, there are many literacy educators in the United States who have incorporated elements of the approach into their teaching without realizing that they have been influenced by Paulo Freire.

Freire's approach has been called "deeply contextual" (Chacoff, 1989, p. 49), because in it, learning to read and write flows from the discussion of themes of importance to adult learners drawn from their real-life experiences. Formal language study plays a secondary role to learners' conceptual development. Learners acquire individual reading and writing skills through a process of inquiry into the nature of real-life problems facing the community of learners. In this sense, the Freirean approach can be considered a variant of the whole language approach to literacy described by Newman (1985), Goodman (1986), Hamayan and Pfleger (1987), and Simich-Dudgeon (1989).

The thematic content of literacy education in Freirean programs is drawn from the cultures of the participants. In Freirean terms, culture "includes how people labor, create, and make life choices" (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 5). Culture is not a static set of customs, religious beliefs, social attitudes, forms of address and attire, and foods; rather, it is a dynamic process of transformation and change laden with conflicts to resolve and choices to be made, both individually and as a community. Jurmo (1987) categorizes Freire as an exponent of "literacy for social change" because Freire argues that unjust social conditions are the cause of illiteracy and that the purpose of adult basic education is to enable learners to participate actively in liberating themselves from the conditions that oppress them.

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This liberatory aspect of Freire's philosophy is important for program management as well as for learning. Many programs following the Freirean approach have adopted management structures that give students significant control over the direction of present and future educational activities (Jurmo, 1987; Collins, Balmuth, & Jean, 1989).

What Are the Key Features of the Freirean Approach?

The two most distinctive features of the Freirean approach are *dialogue* and *problem posing*. Freire describes dialogue as an "I-thou relationship between two subjects" in which both parties confront each other as knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two-way communication (Freire, 1973, p. 52). Teachers possess knowledge of reading and writing; students possess knowledge of the concrete reality of their cultures. As with advocates of other humanistic teaching approaches, Freirean educators vehemently reject what Freire has termed "the banking concept of education," where the teacher's primary role is to transmit knowledge to students, "depositing" information into students as they would deposit money into a bank (Freire, 1970, 1973; Graman, 1988; Auerbach & Burgess, 1985). Instead, Freirean education is a mutual process of reflecting upon and developing insights into the students' evolving cultures. The lecture format, where the teacher talks and the students passively receive information, is replaced by the "culture circle," where teachers and students face one another and discuss issues of concern in their own lives (Freire, 1970, 1973).

The term "problem posing" is often misunderstood, perhaps because of the negative connotations surrounding the word "problem" and the frequent reference to "problem-solving skills" in education. In the Freirean approach, cultural themes in the form of open-ended problems are incorporated into materials, such as pictures, comics, short stories, songs, and video dramas, that are then used to generate discussion. The teacher asks a series of open-ended questions about these materials that encourage students to elaborate on what they see in them. Ultimately, this questioning process leads the students to define the real-life problem being represented, discuss its causes, and propose actions that can be taken to solve it (Freire, 1970, 1973; Wallerstein, 1983). Ideally, the solutions evolving from the group's discussion will entail actions in which reading and writing skills are required, thus giving learners a concrete purpose for the literacy they are developing. Freirean advocates contrast problem-*posing* with problem-*solving* approaches to literacy instruction. In problem-solving approaches, educators identify students' life problems for them a priori, and then design

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lessons to give students the knowledge they need to solve those problems (Freire, 1970; Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Noble, 1983; Faigin, 1985; Graman, 1988; Fargo, 1981).

How Is the Freirean Approach Used in Native Language Literacy Education?

The methods developed by Freire in Brazil in the early 1960s for native language literacy are still in use in many developing countries in Latin America and Africa. In the United States, organizations such as the Hispanic Literacy Council in Chicago; Bronx Educational Services, Union Settlement House, El Barrio Popular, and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union in New York; Basic Adult Spanish Education (BASE) in Los Angeles; and the Adult Literacy Resources Institute in Boston have used Freire's methods to teach initial literacy in Spanish, in what are sometimes referred to as Basic Education in the Native Language (BENL) programs.

Freire developed his approach working with a team of anthropologists, educators, and students in Brazil using a multiphase plan to carry out a program of initial literacy instruction in Portuguese for rural peasants and villagers. The first phase of the Brazilian literacy plan consisted of an extended period of social research in the communities where the program was to be implemented. Members of the literacy team spent time in those communities, participating in informal conversations with residents, observing their culture, and listening to their life stories. The team researched the vocabulary of the communities, looking for recurring words and themes to be included in materials for the literacy program. In the second phase of the plan, the literacy team chose "generative words" from their vocabulary lists that would later be used to help students develop elementary skills in decoding and encoding print. Generative words contain syllables that are separated and recombined to form other words. (According to Freire, 1970, in Portuguese only fifteen words are needed to generate all the other words in the language.) Like Ashton-Warner's concept of "key words" (1963), Freire believed that generative words should have special affective importance to learners and should evoke the social, cultural, and political contexts in which learners use them (Freire, 1973).

In Brazil, the building of the conceptual analysis skills needed for decoding a written text was carried out through the oral discussion of cultural themes present in people's daily lives (Freire, 1973). In the third phase of the Brazilian program, these themes were presented in a symbolic, codified way in the form of drawings of familiar scenes in the life of the community. Illiterate adults were encouraged to "read" their reality by analyzing the elements of the scenes using some of the same decoding tools, such as background knowledge and contextual information, that they would use with a written code. Each scene depicted conflicts found within the community for students to recognize, analyze, and attempt to resolve as a group. The generative words from the vocabulary lists compiled in the first phase of the plan were embedded in these codifications (Freire, 1973). In the course of identifying the problem in a given code and seeking its solution, learners would "name" the embedded generative words, giving teachers the raw material for developing reading and writing exercises.

The final phase of planning the literacy program involved the preparation of so-called discovery cards based on the generative words discussed above. Each discovery card contained a generative word separated into its component syllables, giving learners the opportunity to recombine syllables to form other words in their vocabulary (Freire, 1973). Use of the discovery card method was in keeping with established syllabary techniques frequently used to teach word-attack skills in phonetically and orthographically regular languages such as Spanish and Portuguese. (See, for example, Gudschinsky, 1967.) Recently, however, some Freirean practitioners working in BENL programs in the United States have begun to question the validity of total reliance on the syllabary method and are urging a shift toward more use of "whole-word" and "text-focused" methods (Rabideau, 1989), discussed in more detail below.

How Can the Freirean Approach Be Adapted for Use in ESL Literacy Education?

Literacy teachers in the United States and Canada who work with adult nonnative speakers of English have attempted to apply Freire's general approach, using compatible ESL teaching methods and techniques. In doing so, they have had to overcome two important difficulties. First, Freire's approach assumes that learners are highly knowledgeable about the culture in which they live, and that they are expert speakers of the language that they are learning to read and write. For nonnative speakers of English in predominantly English-speaking countries, neither of these conditions pertains. How can teachers pose problems for their classes to discuss in English, and then develop literacy lessons based on these discussions, if their students cannot speak English?

A number of authors have suggested that beginning ESL students can develop problem-posing and dialogue skills rather early on in their acquisition of English. Teachers can foster the process by focusing their initial instruction on developing their students' descriptive vocabularies and teaching them to use questions to exchange information in English. Some familiar ESL methods and techniques used by Freirean practitioners to develop students' descriptive and questioning abilities have included language experience stories, oral histories, Total Physical Response activities, picture stories, the use of flash cards to introduce new vocabulary and structures, and skits conducted with puppets (Wallerstein, 1983; Nash, Cason, Rhum, McGrail, & Gomez-Sanford, 1989; Faigin, 1985; Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987; Barndt & Marino, 1983).

A second problem for ESL teachers is that the spelling and syllabic structures of English do not lend themselves to the syllabary method originally used by Freire in Portuguese. How, then, can generative words be used to build word-attack skills in reading and writing? Raúl Aflorve, a literacy trainer for the Association for Community Based Education, uses a whole-word and word-family method. Learners memorize the spelling of each new vocabulary word and place each of these words in lists of other words on the basis of similar morphological structure or related meaning. For example, the word "American" might appear in two word lists: in one list with words such as "African," "Dominican," and "Canadian," and in another list

with words suggested by students, such as "apple pie," "Statue of Liberty," and "rich" (R. L. Añorve, personal communication, October 10, 1988).

Other practitioners adapt the use of generative words to the phonics method of reading instruction, where students learn the spelling patterns of English in order to be able to sound out new words they need to read and write. In languages such as Spanish and Portuguese, generative words contain syllables that can be recombined to form new words. In English, generative words are used to teach other words with the same sound-letter correspondences or similar morphological structures (Long & Speigel-Podnecky, 1988). Still others have abandoned the use of generative words altogether in favor of whole language techniques developed for English.

How Can the Curriculum Be Based on Students' Life Experiences and Cultures When Teachers Do Not Speak Students' Languages?

In her book *Language and Culture in Conflict*, Nina Wallerstein (1983) emphasizes that ESL teachers and students come from different cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds that need to be recognized as distinct but equally valid. To bridge this experience gap, teachers must make special efforts to get to know the realities faced by students in their personal lives and communities, either by living among their students or by observing in class and in the community. Wallerstein recommends that teachers visit the homes of their students as invited guests to learn firsthand about their lives and families. To learn about the cultural attributes of students, teachers should attempt to be present as observers at times of cultural transmission from the older generation to the younger (social rites and child-rearing practices) and cultural preservation (festivals and historic celebrations in the students' neighborhoods). They should also learn about times of cultural disruption, by asking students either in simplified English or through an interpreter to describe their immigration to the host country and to compare their lives in the two countries. Teachers should also become familiar with the neighborhoods where students live, walking in them with students, taking photographs, and bringing realia back to class to discuss. In class, teachers should observe student-student interactions, including body language, and take note of students' actions, because these usually reveal students' priorities and problems. The teacher should also invite students to share objects from their cultures with others in class.

Having a bilingual aide in the ESL class can also facilitate dialogue on the cultural themes and problems that generate the curriculum in the Freirean approach. Hemmendinger (1987) found cultural themes and problems for the curriculum through classroom observation and conversations with her Laotian Hmong students. Sometimes problem-posing activities resulted from the sharing of cultural information; at other times the discussion of a problem led to intercultural dialogue. In one instance, for example, she found a student closely examining all the potted plants in the class. When Hemmendinger, through the bilingual aide, inquired as to why the student was interested in the plants, she found that he was a practitioner of Hmong herbal medicine. This led to a discussion of Hmong health and medicinal practices as they compared to those practiced by the dominant culture in Canada and to problems that students were having as they confronted the Canadian health-care system.

Can the Freirean Approach Be Used with Competency-Based Approaches to ESL?

Although some educators advocating the Freirean approach have criticized competency-based ESL as being a form of "banking education" (Auerbach & Burgess, 1985; Graman, 1988), other Freire-inspired ESL teachers have described their use of competency-based instruction within the Freirean framework to teach specific language skills and functions (Faigin, 1985; Hemmendinger, 1987). Working with Central American refugees in Washington, DC, Spener (1990a) adapted the Freirean approach to the selection and development of ESL competencies in the curriculum. In bilingual discussion workshops, Spener and his students engaged in posing problems in which the solutions were related to the learning of English. The product of each of these workshops was a class syllabus agreed on by the group that included the daily situations where students felt improving their English would help them most. For each situation on a class's syllabus, Spener wrote out specific ESL competencies in Spanish and English that he would then bring back to class for the students to reject, modify, or approve for inclusion in their syllabus. The syllabus, which was called the study agenda, served as a guide to follow, allowing Spener and his students to incorporate other elements of dialogue and problem posing in class sessions to enrich the educational process (Spener, 1990a, 1990b).

Where Can I Learn More about Adapting the Freirean Approach to My Program?

In addition to consulting the references and suggestions for further reading cited below, you can contact the Association for Community Based Education (ACBE), a federation of local grass-roots organizations in the United States that run community education programs for social change. ACBE employs a team of literacy trainers who are experienced in adapting the Freirean approach to programs for minority-language adults. ACBE trainers travel throughout the United States conducting workshops for local literacy providers. Call or write ACBE, 1804 Vernon Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20009, 202/462-6333.

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